WILKESON TOWN HALL

FAIRFAX BRIDGE CLOSURE

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The Closure

- April 14, 2025 – WSDOT closed the Fairfax Bridge after inspections revealed serious structural concerns following decades without major rehabilitation.

- Fairfax residents were left feeling isolated, with limited legal access only for property owners.

- Local communities lost their direct connection to Mount Rainier traffic, tourism, and economic lifeline.

- The closure created immediate challenges for safety, access, and emergency response. Impacts we continue to navigate today.

WSDOT Bridge Updates

April 14, 2025

- **Bridge closed** due to severe structural deterioration after decades of deferred maintenance.

Planning Study (Aug 2025)

- Build Option: **Replace bridge** north of existing location (~$160M).
- No-Build Option: **Permanent closure + landowner compensation** (~$70–$80M).

Funding Status

- **$1.5M** funded for planning study.
- **$7M** preservation funds programmed for design, environmental review, and right-of-way (18-24 months)
- Depending on final choice, **$72M–$152M** more required.
- No construction funding identified.

Organic Act of 1916

Created the National Park Service – Signed by President Woodrow Wilson on August 25, 1916, establishing a unified agency to manage national parks and monuments.

Conservation Mandate – Directed the NPS to protect scenery, natural and historic objects, and wildlife.

Public Enjoyment – Ensured parks would be available for the enjoyment of the American people.

Legacy for Future Generations – Required that resources be conserved and left unimpaired for those who come after us.

True Cost of Losing
Mt. Rainier's Northwest Gateway Entrance

Access Without Barriers
✓ Unlike other park entrances, which are often overcrowded and increasingly require timed reservations, the Fairfax Bridge side offered something unique: open access. It provided families, day-hikers, and visitors without reservations the ability to experience the park without the stress of limited permits or hours-long waits at other gates.

Only Old-Growth Rainforest in the Park
✓ The Carbon River entrance provides access to one of the last inland temperate rainforests in the U.S. It is the only rainforest ecosystem within Mount Rainier National Park. Without this side, visitors lose the ability to experience a globally rare ecosystem, much like losing Olympic's Hoh Rainforest would erase the only rainforest access in that park.

Unique Geological and Cultural Heritage
✓ This side of the park preserves remnants of early coal mining towns like Fairfax, the historic ranger station, and the original roadbeds that once carried families, rangers, and climbers into the wilderness. It ties Wilkeson + Carbonado's heritage directly to Mount Rainier.

Critical for Education, Science, and Stewardship
✓ Researchers and university field programs have long used the Carbon River corridor to study glaciers, volcanology, and forest ecosystems. Without access, vital research and conservation education are cut off.

The Wonderland Trail is Not an Alternative
✓ The 93-mile Wonderland Trail is a demanding backcountry route that takes 10 to 14 days to complete. Suggesting it as a substitute for road access is neither equitable nor inclusive. Families, seniors, people with disabilities, and most visitors cannot simply "jump on the trail" to reach this side of the park. Without vehicle access, an entire region of Mount Rainier is effectively closed off to the public.

Community Impacts

✔ **Tourism & Park Access:** Major decline in visitation with both the Fairfax Bridge closure and now the White River Bridge closure. Cutting off key gateways to Mount Rainier.

✔ **Economic Hit:** Local businesses are struggling—some reporting down 40% overall, others surviving week to week just to keep their doors open.

✔ **Communication Gaps:** Breakdowns exposed for Fairfax residents; upgrades are underway, but more help is needed.

✔ **Emergency Services:** Longer response times put Fairfax residents at greater risk.

Wilkeson's Response

Scope of Outreach

- 75+ meetings, calls, and letters with state, regional, and federal leaders
- 25+ agencies and organizations engaged (WSDOT, Governor's Office, Commerce, PSRC, Sustainable Northwest, Emergency Services, etc.)
- Several legislators and elected officials briefed and supportive (Gov. Ferguson, Sen. Fortunato, Rep. Penner, Rep. Fey, Sen. Cantwell, Deputy Director, Dept. of Interior, Nathan Naidu, Dr. Scott Harrison, White River SD Superintendent, Pierce County Executive Mello, Pierce County Council Dave Morell, Mt Raininer National Park Superintendent, Greg Dudgeon)
- Fire districts and emergency partners engaged (Buckley Fire Dept, East Pierce Fire + Rescue, with regional coordination)
- Multiple nonprofits and private stakeholders (Weyerhaeuser, Sustainable Northwest, Trailhead Direct, Olympic Hiking Co., Forterra)
- Regional cities (Buckley, South Prairie, Darrington) have all joined in solidarity

Key Achievements

- Over 10,500 supporters have signed our petition calling for the Fairfax Bridge to be rebuilt.
- Sen. Fortunato actively advocating for emergency funding and bridge replacement (~$100–150M project).
- Rep. Jake Fey (House Transportation Chair) acknowledged Wilkeson's request for support and indicated potential opportunities during the 2026 legislative session.
- City of Buckley + South Prairie passed a resolutions supporting Wilkeson's emergency declaration.
- PSRC identified Wilkeson as potentially eligible for grants, opening potential multi-million-dollar funding pathways.
- 137-acre acquisition advancing, pending Pierce County Council approval; a project under review for Pierce County Conservation Futures grant.
- Emergency relief measures launched locally, including micro-grants for Carbon Canyon residents and communications upgrades.
- Emergency Rapid Response Grant, draft proposal submitted to Dept of Comm. on behalf of Fairfax residents, targeting emergency communications, evacuation planning, and gate safety improvements.

Overall Impact

- Built a bipartisan coalition recognizing the impact on our local towns.
- Elevated the Fairfax Bridge closure to a state, regional, and national level priority.
- Positioned Wilkeson as a leader in rural resilience, leveraging partnerships and creative funding strategies.

Wilkeson Priorities + Planning

Emergency Relief – Residents & Businesses

- Grant Opportunities
- Small Business Aid - SRF Funding
- Emergency Services Access
- Communication Upgrades

Wilkeson's Way Forward

- Pursuing land acquisition from Weyerhaeuser
- Creating Wilkeson's own recreation & tourism destination
- Driving local economic growth and resilience

Fairfax Bridge Rebuild

- Defining clear advocacy goals.
- Coordinating with state, regional, and federal stakeholders to secure resources and elevate the project.
- Building partnerships with recreation and community advocates.
- Ensuring Wilkeson's voice is heard at the state and federal level through direct engagement.

The Human Impact in Fairfax

Resident Urgent Concerns

- **Safety & Security:** fire danger, gate enforcement, unauthorized key use.
- **Road Conditions:** one-lane hazards, winter travel risks, vehicle damage.
- **Access & Communication:** need for reliable emergency communications and a secondary evacuation route.
- **Resident Impact:** increased costs and delays from detours.

Emergency Rapid Response Grant

- **Draft request submitted** focused on emergency communications and gate updates on access road for residents,further supporting our EMS.
- Working with the **Department of Emergency Management** on secondary evacuation routes, mapping where residents are located, and strengthening safety protocols

Access Road Claims Process

- A previously denied Fairfax tort claim has **now been accepted** and will be reimbursed.
- A dedicated staff member is now assigned solely to Fairfax claims to **ensure consistency.**
- **Residents can submit claims at the Wilkeson Town Hall** with staff assistance.
- This means a clearer process, faster reviews, and **real reimbursement** for vehicle damage caused by the access road.

Friends of the Carbon Canyon

- Jill Cartwright - Share Updates

Wilkeson Historical District, 501(c)(3)

✓ **Purpose:** Preserve Wilkeson's heritage while driving economic revitalization and supporting local community resilience.

✓ **Focus Areas:**
- Land acquisition for recreation and conservation
- Economic development, tourism, and local business support
- Community and resident support programs

✓ **Recent Action:** Provided a micro-grant to residents for emergency radios and licenses, strengthening local safety and communication.

✓ **Moving Forward:** Focused on supporting small businesses and regaining lost tourism opportunities.

Public Support Driving State + Federal Attention

- More than 11,000 signers have added their names in support of a petition calling for a rebuild of the Fairfax Bridge.

- These signatures continue to serve as a powerful advocacy tool, showing lawmakers at every level the depth of public support for replacing the bridge and protecting access to our public lands.

- The support from Executive Mello's office + Coucil Memeber Dave Morrell has helped secure endorsements and opened doors with our elected officials, reinforcing the urgency of restoring access to Wilkeson.

- We are actively engaged with Governor Bob Ferguson and his team, who are working with us to support Fairfax residents through grant funding, and we continue to press for stronger relief for our local businesses.

- We have spoken with the Deputy Director of the U.S. Department of the Interior, underscoring that the Fairfax Bridge closure is a national issue tied to access into Mount Rainier National Park.

Next Steps

1. **Support Residents & Businesses**

- Advance the **Emergency Rapid Response Grant** request (ERR) for satellite phones, evacuation planning, and access gate safety of Fairfax Residents.
- Launch initiatives to **support small businesses** showing revenue losses, including, GoFundMe, tourism recovery campaigns and grant assistance.

2. **Secure Land Acquisition**

- **Finalize Purchase & Sale** Agreement with Weyerhaeuser for the 137-acre parcel.
- Leverage funding streams: **Pierce County Conservation Futures**, Opportunity Fund, Sustainable Northwest, and philanthropy.
- Position the land as a **cornerstone for Wilkeson's own recreation** and tourism destination.
- **Build partnerships** with recreation lobbyists, nonprofits, and county/state agencies.

3. The Path Forward: Rebuilding the Fairfax Bridge

Priority Designation
- Collaborate with WSDOT and partner agencies to prioritize the Fairfax Bridge replacement, recognizing multiple factors will determine final approval and funding.

State Budget Partnerships
- Work with state legislators (House & Senate Transportation Committees, budget writers) to advocate for a line-item in the 2025–27 transportation budget.
- Engage Pierce County leadership to co-sign funding requests and resolutions.

Federal Match
- Partner with Washington's U.S. Senators (Cantwell and Murray) to align state funding with federal programs (RAISE, FHWA Emergency Relief, EDA).
- Engaging the Deputy Director of the U.S. Department of the Interior to spotlight the critical loss of National Park access and build federal momentum for solutions.

Regional Coalition
- Build partnerships with Buckley, South Prairie, Carbonado, Pierce County, and recreation/economic development groups to show this is a regional crisis, not just Wilkeson's.
- Strength in numbers increases pressure on Olympia and Washington D.C.

Community Voice
- Keep momentum alive through petitions, town halls, media coverage, and testimony.
- Demonstrating 10,500+ supporters, makes the case that rebuilding the Fairfax Bridge is urgent and broadly supported.
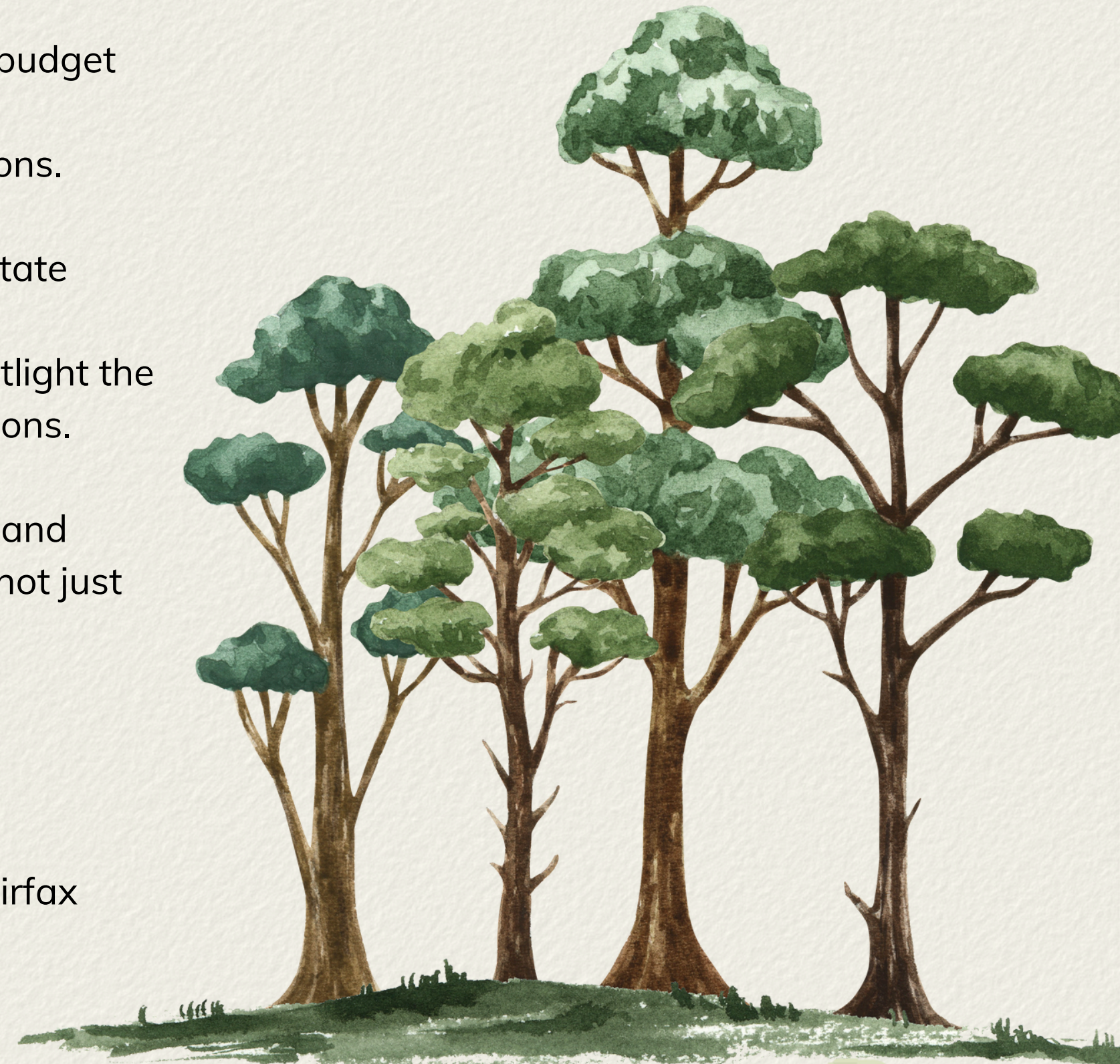
Discussion + Questions

Moving Forward Together

Wilkeson has always been, and will remain, a **gateway town**.

Our connection to Mount Rainier makes us unique, but it also means **we carry the responsibility of sustaining** the businesses, services, and community life that depend on that access.

Some may have noticed the quiet since the bridge closure, but we **cannot get used to that quietness**. A thriving gateway town needs visitors, local commerce, and opportunities for families to build their lives here.

The road ahead will not be easy, and some days will feel heavier than others. But our goal remains clear: not only to restore access, but to ensure Wilkeson continues to grow, serve, and sustain itself for **many more generations to come**.

THANK YOU